

On January 8th 2005, Charles H. McDonald passed away at the tender young age of sixty-eight. On that day, the world lost an amazing educator and a superior human being, and the entire Eagle Hill School community mourned the loss of its beloved 30-year headmaster. Closer to home, my mother and my three siblings and I were forced to say an all too early goodbye to a loving husband, a wonderful father and a dear friend.

From 1968—1998, Charles walked the sidewalks and hallways of this campus with absolute certainty, unwavering conviction and billowing pride. He knew exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there. Ladies and gentlemen, he is the very reason—and in the early years the only reason—that we are here today. Graduates, as your final teachable moment at Eagle Hill School, I would like to offer you a history lesson that chronicles a legacy of extraordinary leadership, learning, laughter, and love. It's a story about a man who spent an entire life putting the needs of others first—refusing to take “no” for an answer so that students like you could fulfill all of their dreams.

In the mid-1960's, Dr. Peter Figgie and Dr. James Cavanaugh—both of Georgetown Medical School—decided that they wanted to transform their quiet summer estate in Hardwick, Massachusetts into a school. With the assistance of Charles Drake, a Ph.D. in education, a one-classroom school-house first opened its doors in September of 1967—and Eagle Hill School was born. The school's mission, to educate students with learning (dis)abilities, was novel and as such, replete with uncertainty. The idea of a school made up exclusively of students for whom traditional schools had failed was maligned by leading educational experts across the country.

By the end of that first year it appeared that the “experts” were correct. With only four students enrolled, the school was in financial despair and all but defunct. And then, as if Hollywood had written the script, out of nowhere appeared a knight in shining armor. Charles McDonald, accompanied by his beautiful wife Jane and with four young children in tow, found his way to Hardwick to try to convince Drs. Cavanaugh and Figgie to let him re-open Eagle Hill for more year. After many days of discussion and debate, Cavanaugh and Figgie finally relented...and little did they know that with that decision they had just changed the field of education—and the lives of countless young men and women—forever.

So what did Cavanaugh and Figgie see in this 32-year-old police officer with no educational experience? Well, the same thing everyone saw in Charles—a look in his eyes that said this man is different—and special. He was a giant of a man in every sense of the word. At 6' 4" and 250 (ish) pounds, Charles made you believe that anything was possible...inevitable even. Long before there was a Dr. Riendeau, a Mr. Baglio, Mr. Harbert, Ms. Wynne, Mr. Kelley, or me—there was Charles McDonald doing all of the functions by himself—with the exception perhaps of tucking in the students—which was done by his wife Jane. And the early years weren't always easy, as recollected by Dr. Jane Cronin in a recent letter:

“I remember a day in 1970 when Charles gathered the faculty together and in a very somber tone (which was extremely rare for Charles) announced that the state's fiscal crisis was seriously affecting EHS and, therefore, there would be no

paychecks for the following two weeks. The room was stunned...and silent. Charles stayed and fielded every question calmly and confidently and reassured everyone that this was a temporary situation. Under his steady hand, EHS weathered the storm and emerged stronger than ever.”

Charles was a graduate of Boston State College where he received a B.A. in education and went on to receive an M.Ed. in special education and a C.A.G.S. in school psychology from Assumption College. In addition, Charles worked toward a doctoral degree in mental health administration at the University of Massachusetts. Over the next thirty-one years, Charles worked tirelessly to advance an educational research agenda and to create Eagle Hill School as you know it today. His drive to create a world-class school took many forms, and his legendary ability to turn ivory tower aspirations into real-world bricks and mortar was second only to his love for students and their dreams. Charles’ vision, dedication, and willingness to roll up his sleeves to get things done served as the inspiration for Eagle Hill School and for the nascent field of special education. In fact, countless institutions trace their roots back to Charles’ vision and to Eagle Hill School. Among his many gifts, Charles’ ability to inspire excellence in those who worked with him was perhaps the most remarkable. This is evident today in the accomplishments of those who flourished under Charles’ tutelage.

In 1975, the Eagle Hill model was exported from Hardwick and emulated by Mark and Rayma Griffin at EHS Greenwich and in 1985 by Len Tavormino at EHS Southport. Charles Drake took talents nurtured at Eagle Hill School on to found Landmark School in 1971 and later Landmark College in 1984. Dr. Drake’s son would go on to found White Oak School in 1990, and Eagle Hill School’s Howard Delano established the Pine Ridge School in 1968. Beginning his career as a teacher at Eagle Hill School, Rick Lavoie would go on to become a nationally recognized lecturer and advocate for the learning disabled. In fact, shortly after Charles’ passing I received a beautiful note from Rick Lavoie sharing his favorite memory of Charles. It read:

“It was my first weekend as duty master in 1972. I was in my office in the rear of the Main House when I heard a heart-stopping scream from the parking lot. An 11-year-old boy named Lee Benjamin had been riding an old beat-up bike when he crashed and tore a hole in his flesh that was now gushing with blood. I ran to Lee in a panic to try and stem the flow up blood. Just then, Charles pulled up into the parking lot and leisurely walked our way. I looked up at him desperately and asked if I should take Lee to the hospital. Charlie paused, rubbed his chin and said: “Well, that would make perfectly good sense.” As we loaded Lee into the van I asked Charlie if he thought Lee would need stitches. He pulled me aside and whispered, “Absolutely, at least 15 stitches. But remember, Rick. You are in charge. You need to be the coolest, calmest person in the room.” I will never forget that leadership lesson, and I will always love Charlie for that gift. He was so special to so many of us in those early years. God bless him...and his entire family. Love, Rick and Janet Lavoie. P.S. Lee needed exactly 15 stitches. Way to go Sir Charles!”

Charles McDonald loved this school with all his heart. It was more than a job for Charles—it became a way of life. I have vivid childhood memories of the green EHS phone sitting on the kitchen table. That phone rang incessantly and often it meant that he had to leave his family to attend to a school matter. Every night for thirty years he put his head on the pillow knowing that he was fully responsible for the safety, health and well being of more than a hundred students in his care—not including his own family—and I'll be honest, my siblings weren't that easy. It would be many more years before I would understand, appreciate, and share his love for this school—and then fully comprehend the awesome responsibility of being entrusted with the personal, social, and educational development of so many human beings.

Charles could have gone on to be the headmaster of any other school in this country, or just as likely gone on to be the CEO of any company he wanted. Ultimately, however, he knew in his heart that from this lofty perch in Hardwick Massachusetts he could help positively influence the field of education and make a difference in the lives of children...one soul at a time. I close with an excerpt from a recent email I received from David St. Denny, class of 1974:

“I am so very sorry at the loss of your father. I adored him. He and I had a special relationship. Some of the students feared him, but I always smiled when I saw him and had the utmost respect for him. He made me feel important the first time we ever met. I'll never forget it, my father and I arrived from Boston and Charles shook my hand first, and then asked my father to join us only after we had had a chance to meet first. No secret meetings—no hidden agendas. Some 18 years later, in the winter of 1992, I came back to thank Mr. McDonald for all he had done to change my life. As I walked down the hallway, from behind I heard a bellowing voice: “May I help you?” As I turned around, without missing a beat Charles said: “Oh yes, David St. Denny...the track star. Didn't you win the headmaster's cup?” First of all, there was no headmaster's cup when I attended, and if there was, I was not a top contender. But yet, nearly two decades later, Charles McDonald was still making me feel like a million bucks.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the Eagle Hill School community has lost an icon, and we have all lost a friend. In honor of his extraordinary leadership, and in recognition of his role as the leader of the faculty for thirty years, the Eagle Hill School board of trustees has voted to name the soon-to-be completed faculty library in the new academic center in his name. Hereafter, it will be called the Charles H. McDonald Faculty Library.